

A new St Kilda Census, 1764

The discovery of a previously unknown census of St Kilda in the 18th century allows us to push our knowledge of the inhabitants of the island back by two generations, or more than 50 years.

St Kilda has been the object of great curiosity for many centuries. One of the earliest, and most influential, accounts is that of Martin Martin, who visited the island in 1697 and published a description of the customs and culture of the inhabitants of this remote island. He does not name any of the islanders but gives the total population of the island as 180. In the 18th century the number of visitors recording their experiences increased and ranged from the Rev Kenneth Macaulay's 'History of St Kilda' (1758), Rev John Walker's 'History of the Hebrides' (1771), though he never actually stepped onto the island, to Rev John Lane Buchanan's 'Travels in the Western Hebrides' (1793). These publications mention the overall population but do not name individual islanders.

Until this discovery, the earliest known complete census of the islanders dates from 1822. This was made by the Free Church minister, Rev John MacDonald (1779-1849) known as 'The Apostle of the North', who visited the island on three separate occasions between 1822 and 1827 as a missionary on behalf of the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK). Significantly MacDonald's census includes the ages of the islanders, which allows us to make links back to the 1764 census.

St Kilda was evacuated in 1930, and has now been declared a UNESCO world heritage site.

So why was the census taken?

1. The census might have been taken as a consequence of the publication of Kenneth Macaulay's, 'History of St Kilda'. This was first published in May 1764 and its appearance might have encouraged someone to make this record.

2. The more likely reason is that it was made in connection with Dr John Walker's report on the Hebrides. In 1764 the SSPCK, the General Assembly and the Board of the Annexed Estates commissioned Rev Walker, minister for Moffat, to investigate the state of religion and education in the Hebrides, the area's natural history and population and the state of manufactures, agriculture and fisheries. He set off in the summer of 1764 but did not have sufficient time to visit St Kilda, though the island is included in his report. He must have received his information from others, most likely the ministers of the various parishes. It is interesting that the figure Walker gives for the total St Kilda population was 90, a figure which matches the number of inhabitants in the census taken on 15th June 1764 exactly. Could these details have been provided by Alexander MacLeod, who was appointed assistant minister on St Kilda in June 1763?

The 1764 Census

The census records the names of 90 islanders: 38 males and 52 females. The names appear to be organised by household giving a total of 19 families and 9 individuals (widows/widowers/unmarried).

According to Martin Martin's account the population of the island in 1697 was about 180 people, or 27 families. In 1727 there was an outbreak of smallpox on the island which drastically reduced the population to 42 people (9 men, 10 women, 15 boys and 8 girls). New settlers with the surnames Gillies, MacQueen and McCrimmon came from Skye and

Harris. But the population never recovered and by the time of James Wilson's census of 1841 there were only 105 on the island.

Prior to 1727 the main family names on the island were MacDonald, Morrison and Campbell. Campbell disappears after 1727 but the Gillies, Macdonald, MacQueen, McCrimmon, McKinnon, Fergusson, Morison and McLeod names continued: McLeod and Morison disappeared between 1851 and 1861. The last inhabitants of the island who were evacuated in 1930 were MacQueens, Fergusons, Gillies, MacDonalds and MacKinnons. In the 1764 list there is also the single appearance of a family of the name of 'McVicar'. The names are given in their anglicised form though the spellings of, for example Gillies (Gilees) and McQueen (McQuien) are unusual.

As the 1822 census helpfully provides the ages of the family members, we can make strong links back from it to 1764 for 5 individuals:

- 'John McWheen' aged 72 in 1822 is 'John McQuien' the son of Finlay and Mary McQuien in the 1764 list;
- Ewen McKinnon, aged 63 in 1822, is the son of Neill and Ann McKinnon listed in 1764;
- Finlay McDonald, aged 61, is the same as the son of Donald and Christie McDonald in 1764;
- Alexander Gillies, aged 64 in 1822, is the son of Donald and Margrett Gilees in 1767;
- Donald McDonald, aged 69, is the son of John and Mary McDonald.

There is also a strong possibility that the 'Catherine Ferguson old maid of 83' listed in James Wilson's census of 1841, is the same as the 'Keatt Ferguson' the daughter of Finlay and Christy Ferguson in 1764.

Diet on St Kilda

As well as the names of the inhabitants, the 1764 census gives the number of eggs and fowls eaten daily on the island, namely: 36 'wild fowls eggs and 18 fowls' per person, a staggering total of 3240 eggs and 1620 birds.

Descriptions of the diet of the islanders often comment on the prodigious quantity of seabirds and their eggs consumed on the island. Martin Martin noted that for the entire year the community ate 22,600 solan geese (gannets). Fulmars, gannets and puffins, and even the occasional great auk, were caught by the islanders, the men being skilled and intrepid rock climbers or 'cragmen'. In his report of his 1822 visit, Rev MacDonald witnessed the killing of 1600 young gannets, too young and too fat to fly away. Macaulay, who visited just 6 years before the 1764 census was taken, describes the islanders' reliance on birds, either fresh or stored in their stone 'cleits' which dotted the island. As well as providing food, fulmar oil was used to light lamps, its down was used for bedding, its fat for healing salves: 'Deprive us of the fulmer' one islander told him, 'and St Kilda is no more'.

Birds and birds' eggs were the mainstay of the islanders' diet though they had cattle and sheep, cultivated some some oats, barley and potatoes and caught limited quantities of fish.

What is the connection with Maclachlan of Maclachlan?

There would appear to be no obvious connection between the MacLachlan of MacLachlan family and St Kilda and the presence of this list among their family papers remains a mystery.